

WAR AND BASEBALL

With a stout endorsement from President Franklin Roosevelt, Major League Baseball drew up plans for the 1942 season. It was still January, but many important issues needed to be considered. The most glaring concerned every Major League team's roster. Bob Feller and Hank Greenberg, two of the game's greatest stars and gate attractions, were already in the military. As the months went by, players faced a ramped-up selective service or felt a strong urge to show their patriotism by enlisting. Those who thought ahead enlisted in the navy, where their chances of remaining stateside and playing armed forces baseball were good. The Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois offered a first-class baseball team, as did other bases in Norfolk, Virginia, and Oahu, Hawaii, if one could get transferred there. Many ballplayers opted for this safer opportunity.

Others were bolder, taking their chances and waiting to be called into the army, where overseas duty likely awaited. With hundreds of thousands of names for the draft boards to sift through, a player might be lucky enough to play a full season or more before the draft notice arrived.

The question of revenue weighed heavily on the minds of the team owners. With eligible men leaving for the service in huge numbers, gate receipts were certain to be affected. Civilians who were too old or were rejected for health reasons were joining the defense industry, working

hours that conflicted with afternoon and even night ball games. Add the diluted rosters filled up with career minor leaguers and you find anxious owners scrambling to make a profit. Teams with perennial attendance problems, like the Boston Braves, Philadelphia Phillies, and St. Louis Browns, had to be alarmed at their prospects for the 1942 season and beyond.

For the short term, the transportation system in the United States was running smoothly, but much of the rail system would eventually have to be allocated to move soldiers and sailors from base to base. Hotels near army camps and naval bases would soon become makeshift quarters for housing the servicemen. Major League owners had to be keenly aware of pending difficulty in mapping out rail schedules and accommodations for their teams.

In Cleveland, owner Alva Bradley and general manager Roger Peckinpaugh studied their roster and tried to fit the pieces together. Fortunately, the 1941 infield was intact for now, with Hal Trosky at first base, Ray Mack at second, player-manager Lou Boudreau at shortstop, and Ken Keltner at third. Jeff Heath and Roy Weatherly were still around to play the outfield, but several holes needed to be filled. The absence of Feller already had the pitching staff in a questionable state.

Boudreau, having been given his new job in late 1941, had yet to pilot a single game, but he had the strong backing of Bradley and Peckinpaugh. How the twenty-four-year-old was going to whip the players in shape and keep them in line was still to be seen, but he seemed to have support among players and ex-players alike. In early January, the great Napoleon Lajoie spoke highly of Lou. "Larry," enjoying his retirement in Florida, told the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, "A player-manager is a great asset to a club. I've never seen Boudreau play, but I've heard he is one of the greatest young players to break into the Major Leagues in years." Cleveland pitcher Al Milnar told the local sportswriters "he was willing to work his head off for [Boudreau]."

Still, Boudreau faced the inevitable task of dealing with Roy "Stormy" Weatherly and Jeff Heath and their proclivity for ruining the harmony of any clubhouse. In mid-September of 1941, Weatherly had been abruptly sent home by then-manager Peckinpaugh for lack of hustle and insubordination. Heath was something of a malcontent, whether holding out over salary issues or coming in conflict with umpires, teammates, and opposing players. At an extremely young age for a manager

and with only three full Major League seasons as a player, Lou had to find a way to earn and keep his players' respect, no easy task for even an experienced manager.

In mid-January, the Cleveland baseball writers honored Jeff Heath as the Indians' 1941 player of the year. With Heath's nemesis, manager Oscar Vitt, gone, the outfielder had enjoyed a tremendous year at the plate. He had batted .340, fourth in the American League, and compiled 24 home runs and 123 runs batted in. He was first in triples, with 20, and barely missed the 200-hit mark at 199. Except for batting average, all were career highs.

Heath received a fine set of golf clubs from the writers and predicted optimistically that attendance would increase despite the thousands of men headed for Europe and the South Pacific. Alva Bradley smiled at the prediction but told writers he expected a downturn in customers of anywhere from 20 to 30 percent. In 1941, the Indians had drawn nearly 746,000 fans, but Bradley thought the figures for the upcoming season might bottom out at 500,000.

Taking a few days off from his duties as assistant basketball coach at the University of Illinois, manager Boudreau appeared at the banquet. "We are going to hustle and gamble much more than in the past," he told the writers. He then spoke about the role of baseball while the country was at war, saying, "Our biggest job by far is to provide the moral background for the war effort for the army and navy and we in the game of baseball will cooperate to the fullest."

A short time later, Gene Tunney, former heavyweight boxing champ and current lieutenant commander of the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, visited Cleveland on a recruiting trip. Tunney heaped praise on Bob Feller for his dedicated work as a physical fitness instructor at the center. He mentioned he had at least fifty speaking requests on his desk for Feller from cities all around the country. The navy had a priceless asset in Bob, who turned out to be a boon for recruiting. Wherever he traveled, preaching about the great life of a sailor, recruits were sure to follow. Tunney related how Bob had insisted on active duty in the South Pacific, but for now his services were needed at home. There might even be some time to pitch a few stateside ballgames.

On February 19, just four days before the opening of Major League spring training, the Indians were stunned by Hal Trosky's announcement that he was retiring from baseball. In the latter part of the 1941

season, Trosky, still just twenty-eight years old, began suffering from severe migraine headaches, which impaired his play in the field and at bat. His vision would become so blurred that he had difficulty following the flight of the baseball. The headaches persisted through the off-season and were showing no signs of letting up. Trosky told the *Plain Dealer*, “I have considered the matter seriously and know that by retiring I will be serving the best interests of the ballclub, the public and myself.”

Two weeks prior Hal had written a letter to Alva Bradley, asking to be placed on the voluntary retirement list at least for the 1942 season. Bradley had said nothing to the reporters about it, hoping that Hal might change his mind and take another shot at playing. The Indians could not afford to lose their powerful lefty, who in eight full seasons had averaged 27 home runs and 113 RBIs. With Feller gone indefinitely and now Trosky, the Indians’ chances for contending looked dim.

To replace Trosky, Boudreau announced that Les Fleming would be the starting first baseman. Playing for Nashville in the Southern Association, the twenty-six-year-old had led the league in batting with a robust .414. Previously, the native Texan had bounced around the minor leagues for seven years. He had played two games for the Indians in September of 1941 and was seen as a utility player and backup for Trosky.

The Indians began reporting to the Clearwater, Florida, training camp, checking in at the Fort Harrison Hotel—that is, all but Jeff Heath, who decided to hold out, seeking a hefty 50 percent raise. His action was poorly timed, given that he had a new manager who sorely needed him in camp. Without Feller and Trosky, Heath was Cleveland’s marquee player, an All-Star capable of picking up a lot of the slack. While visiting friends in California, Heath said he might travel to Clearwater and sit down with Roger Peckinpaugh to talk about money. Nobody in the Cleveland front office was holding their breath, and Bradley told the reporters they were so far apart on numbers that he saw no reason to negotiate.

On the first day of training, Boudreau gathered his players to affirm his goals for the season. “I am going to lay particular stress on the point of team loyalty,” he told them. “We have to function more as a unit this year as ever before.” He noted the loss of his two key players, Feller and Trosky, and asked everybody there to step up their game.

Boudreau scheduled workouts for 10:15 in the morning and 2:15 in the afternoon. The early workout featured calisthenics, pepper games, and throwing exercises, while afternoons were set aside for batting

practice. The Indians invested in a pitching machine to lessen the strain on important arms in camp. Pitchers, including Jim Bagby Jr., Al Milnar, and Al Smith, now could spend their time on more productive things such as throwing in game situations.

The spring training schedule would feature thirty-one games, including fifteen against the New York Giants. This marked the ninth season of barnstorming with the familiar National Leaguers. The two ball clubs planned a stop at Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where many Ohio infantrymen were training. It would be the first of times the ballplayers would entertain the troops headed for overseas duty. Both Major Leagues were planning to donate money and spearhead war bond drives, but the best way they could cheer the soldiers up was by showing them a well-played American ballgame.

By early March, Boudreau started to put his team together. One of his two main concerns was catcher. Rollie Hemsley had been sold to Cincinnati, leaving Gene Desautels as the only experienced catcher in camp. The front office signed Otto Denning, a ten-year minor leaguer, and there was a young prospect named Jim Hegan, who seemed to be a year or two away.

The other concern was the outfield. For the time being Weatherly seemed to be past the ugly incidents of the previous season. Heath would likely show up at some point, but whether in a couple of weeks or sometime in April, nobody knew. With a spot open, or maybe two, Boudreau turned his attention to Oris Hockett, a thirty-two-year-old journeyman.

Oris had quite a history behind him, having played minor league ball since 1932. Born in 1909 in Bluffton, Indiana, he moved with his family to Dayton, Ohio, where he played football at Roosevelt High School. After graduation he enrolled at Denison University for one year, then bolted to Mobile, Alabama, where he got a job in the lumber business. He played semipro ball for a time, until several coaches from Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now Auburn University, convinced him to enroll and play football. He studied medicine there for a year, then left abruptly for his parents' home in Dayton. He stayed in town a year and a half, bought a used Model T Ford, and took off for California. He got as far as Omaha, Nebraska, where his money ran out. Hockett sold the car for \$15 and auditioned for the Norfolk ball club in the Nebraska State League. Thinking he might want to return to college and play more football, he signed his name as Jim Brown.

Oris was a true wanderer, unable to stay in the same place for any length of time. In 1933, he left Nebraska and traveled to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He played baseball there for a year, disappeared in 1934, then returned the next season to hit .335. His contract was sold to the Chicago White Sox, but Oris, without explanation, once again packed his bags and set sail for Dayton. He stayed with his family for a time, worked at General Motors, then played for the Dayton ball club of the Mid-Atlantic League. In 1938, the Brooklyn Dodgers bought his contract, and he saw brief playing time at the end of the season. He spent the following year in Milwaukee, then moved on to Nashville in 1940. A year later he batted .359, usually good enough to lead the league but far behind teammate Les Fleming's spectacular .414. The Indians bought Hockett's contract for the 1942 season.

It appeared his wandering days were over, but just before spring training a machine shop offered Oris \$150 a week to work as a machinist. A skilled operator, he mulled over the proposition, but the strong pull of Major League Baseball got the best of him. He reported to Clearwater and made a good impression on manager Boudreau, who must have hoped he would stay put.

On March 6, many Cleveland fans noticed a classified ad in the local papers for a family of four looking to rent a two-bedroom furnished home with a fenced-in yard. The ad was placed by Jeff Heath, leading to the belief the holdout might be over. Two days later, Heath signed for \$15,000, a bit less than the \$18,000 he wanted. Alva Bradley put in a bonus clause stating that if attendance reached a certain number, Heath would get an unspecified amount. With the current situation in the United States, it seemed any bonus money based on attendance was a longshot. Heath told reporters, "I still think I was entitled to more money on the strength of my work last year, but Mr. Bradley thought otherwise and he's the boss." How long Heath would remain contrite was anybody's guess.

That same day the Indians opened the exhibition season in Tampa with a 5–3 win over the Cincinnati Reds. Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis was in the stands along with 2,200 soldiers and sailors who got in without being charged admission. In the ninth inning, a foul ball twisted into the stands, where Landis made a fancy one-handed grab, much to the delight of the servicemen.

As spring training went on, Boudreau continued tinkering with the lineup. Other than the departed Feller, the remaining players appeared

safe from any immediate letters from Uncle Sam. Other teams were not so lucky, with Boston losing pitchers Mickey Harris and Earl Johnson, Washington losing Cecil Travis and Buddy Lewis, and the Philadelphia Athletics saying good-bye to Sam Chapman and Al Brancato. In fact, the Indians received some good news when Mel Harder signed his contract for the upcoming season.

Harder had gotten off to a good start in 1941, but somewhere in June–July he injured his pitching elbow. He tried to gut his way through it, but eventually gave up and decided on surgery. The Indians handed Mel his release but welcomed him back to spring training as a free agent to test out the arm. Early results were promising, and Mel signed on with the Indians once more. Now the Indians had a probable rotation of Bagby, Smith, Milnar, and Harder.

As the players gradually rounded into shape for the start of the regular season, Boudreau got high marks from visiting reporters for his handling of the club. Lou told Gayle Talbot of the Associated Press, “It’s the greatest thrill I’ve ever had. I didn’t know how some of the fellows would like to take orders from me.” But once they arrived and started training, “every worry disappeared.” The honeymoon had a way to go, and the real test would come when the season began.

On March 27, the Indians broke camp to begin their tour of the country with the Giants. They would play games in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Indiana, as well as at Camp Shelby in front of 1,500 grateful Ohio soldiers. At almost every stop, homesick servicemen crowded into the small grandstands to see their favorite sport and converse with the players. Within months they would be shipping out overseas, but for now seeing a ballgame gave the boys a sense of the lives they had enjoyed and were bravely leaving behind. For two hours the soldiers would laugh, applaud, and yell at the umpires just like they did back home. The ballplayers had to have felt good knowing that.

While the Indians and Giants made their way toward Cleveland, word came that Bob Feller was now pitching for the Norfolk Naval Base. On April 3, Feller took the mound to face the University of Richmond. Nearly 10,000 sailors, marines, and pilots in training watched Feller toss three scoreless innings and strike out three batters. Asked how Feller looked, the Richmond coach replied, “We don’t know. My boys didn’t see the ball at all.” Feller’s days stateside were

numbered, but he would have more occasions to play baseball before shipping out.

With the start of the regular season a week away, manager Boudreau made his first questionable decision: he banned his team from playing poker until further notice. Perhaps something had happened on one of the train trips, but Lou did not like the idea of his boys gambling. He believed that if a player lost too big it might affect his play on the field. Some of the guys must have raised an eyebrow at the edict, but nothing was said in public. To pass the hours, they would have to read a lot of newspapers and magazines.

Shortly before opening day, clubs on the East Coast made contingency plans in the event of a surprise German air raid, though the likelihood of that seemed remote. Yankee Stadium had water barrels installed on the roof and an extra supply of fire extinguishers. In case of attack, the front office believed, 15,000–20,000 fans could be safely moved under the concrete stands for protection. The Dodgers and Giants were not afraid to schedule night games, but just in case of an air attack they had engineers modify the light switches to ensure darkness within thirty seconds. The teams were prepared to pipe music and entertainment through the loudspeakers while fans huddled under the stands. At the Polo Grounds, where the Giants played, eight men were hired to guard the roof and watch for any suspicious airplanes flying too low. In Boston, the Braves and Red Sox hired air wardens to patrol the upper deck and watch the skies at each game. In case of a raid, both clubs added printed instructions to every seat for fans to study and note the proper exits. Being roughly five hundred miles from the East Coast, the Indians had little to worry about, but they made plans just to be sure. Alva Bradley worked with the city to have the entire lighting system shut off with only two switches. Making use of the loudspeakers, fans would be instructed to stay in their seats until the “all clear” was given. Extra police and fire personnel were to be on duty at least for the early part of the season.

Many of the owners firmly believed their concrete-and-steel stadiums could withstand any bombardment the feared Luftwaffe had to offer. They expected their players to remain calm on the field during any attack to keep the fans from panicking. This naïve assumption did not involve consulting any of the ballplayers themselves. The best-case scenario for everybody concerned was that no German planes would ever reach the American coast.

On the eve of the regular season, Alva Bradley received a letter from Petty Officer Bob Feller. Still stationed at the Norfolk Naval Base, Feller proposed a game between his guys and a Major League all-star team to be held at Cleveland Municipal Stadium. A July night game was mentioned, with the proceeds going to the armed forces. Bradley hopped on the idea, getting the Cleveland Advertising Club on board and writing for permission from American League president Will Harridge. If carried out properly, Feller's plan might raise a fortune for the soldiers. The venue could accommodate a huge crowd, the Cleveland fans would be eager to see Bob pitch, and bringing in some all-stars would virtually ensure fans came from out of state. A win-win for all involved.